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Facing the crime of the century

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Union-busting often has its unseemly side, but is it really necessary to go out and shoot the pope to get the workers in line? The increasing strength of the Polish union Solidarity is what Italian prosecutor Antonio Albano says led to the May 13, 1981, assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. That's a big story, but not the only one: reading these charges on the front page of *The New York Times* is a welcome development, too.

Claire Sterling, who originally suggested a papal plot in the August 1982 *Reader's Digest*, and who wrote the expansive story on the plot in Sunday's *Times*, had cause to be somewhat surprised herself, for she had understood originally that her story would run in the paper's Sunday magazine. But someone decided to move it up front, a welcome move after two years of having her version of the crime of the century told in close vicinity to the obit page (when there at all). It's also a strong indication that the story is going to start getting the recognition it deserves.

There was little new in Sunday's disclosure for the people who have been keeping up with the case. But the 78-page still-secret report from the Italian prosecutor on which the *Times* story was based (an investigation is under way in Italy to find out how Mrs. Sterling got her hands on it) was something the skeptical have direly needed: official recognition that Turkish gunman Mehmet Ali Agca did not act alone, but was hired to do the killing by the Bulgarian secret service. Since publication, the converted have begun to gather.

The story "is snowballing, at least in Europe," Mrs. Sterling said Tuesday night. "In Italy it is really kicking up a storm. The London *Times* is going to serialize the full story Friday [today] and Saturday. For a non-staff reporter to have a story appear in the London *Times* is unbelievable." And there are far fewer skeptics than when the story broke back in 1982, she says. "I'm

getting adversary reporters who have been rejecting the story as cold-war propaganda now admitting that the case is very strong."

It's about time. One of Mrs. Sterling's biggest adversaries in getting her story told has been the media, which has generally taken the line, even in the face of convincing evidence to the contrary, that this shooting was nothing more than, in the words of Joseph Kraft, one of the "nasty surprises" from a "turbulent Islamic society."

That attitude formed early. Two days after the attack, *The New York Times* reported that "Police are convinced, according to government sources, that Mr. Agca acted alone." Yet that same day, *La Stampa* of Turin quoted Luciano Infelisis, the examining magistrate who signed the warrant for Mr. Agca's arrest, as telling a different story. "For us there is documentary proof that he did not act alone." Herein began an interesting phenomenon: anonymous sources telling one story (usually along the line that Mr. Agca acted alone) and officials willing to go on the record telling another story, often to less acclaim.

In fact, the free press seemed more interested in asserting the innocence of the suspects in the plot than in playing the story straight. Sergei Antonov, the Bulgarian state airline official who suffered the unhappy circumstance of having his office phone number turn up in Mr. Agca's pants pocket when he was arrested in St. Peter's Square, has gotten much more than the benefit of the doubt from the press.

When Italian Judge Ilario Martella authorized Mr. Antonov's transfer from prison to house arrest for health reasons, *The New York Times* carried a story saying Mr. Antonov had been "remanded to Bulgarian custody," indicating that the Bulgarian Connection had been demolished. The British *Guardian*'s headline reported that he had been "freed." The Associated Press said Mr. Antonov had

been "granted provisional liberty."

But Judge Martella had said that he "could not concede provisional liberty to the defendant because of the gravity of the charges against him." When Mr. Antonov was returned to prison a few days later, his recall was not front-page news, as his release had been. Nobody said anything about the Bulgarian Connection having been re-established.

Combine this trend with the odd chumminess between the press and the CIA, whose denials of Bulgarian complicity were usually played big, and you realize that when it comes to suggesting Soviet bloc deviousness, the adversary relationship between the press and government sometimes slithers away. Even suggesting such a thing was too much for some, a point made by a Washington reporter just after Mrs. Sterling's original story appeared in the *Digest*: "Even if it was true," she told the author, "you shouldn't have printed it."

But all that, for the most part, appears to be behind us now. Sure, the Bulgarians will continue to assail the investigation and Mrs. Sterling (she has been called a "20th-century annihilator of the Bulgarian people," a story by Bulgarian Bogomil Rainov asserts that Mr. Antonov, "were it not for the irrefutable logic of time sequence" would be accused "of assassinating John Kennedy, or maybe even Abraham Lincoln").

And it's hard to tell what to expect from *The Washington Post*, which initially told *Reader's Digest* that the original Sterling piece might make a commentary page article some day, then belatedly discovered it was a news story after all. But they gave minuscule coverage of the Italian prosecutor's report. At least it was better treatment than was given by London's *Observer*, which refused to read Mrs. Sterling's latest story, yet last Sunday found room to run a serialized version of *In God's Name*, a new book charging that Pope John Paul I, who reigned 33 days in 1978, had been poisoned by people with purported Vatican connections.

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